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# THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY

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## THE BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE<sup>1</sup>

### OCEANOGRAPHY AND THE SEA-FISHERIES

By Professor WILLIAM A. HERDMAN

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OCEANOGRAPHY has many practical applications, chiefly, but by no means wholly, on the biological side. The great fishing industries of the world deal with living organisms, of which all the vital activities and the inter-relations with the environment are matters of scientific investigation. Aquiculture is as susceptible of scientific treatment as agriculture can be; and the fisherman, who has been in the past too much the nomad and the hunter—if not, indeed, the devastating raider—must become in the future the settled farmer of the sea if his harvest is to be less precarious. Perhaps the nearest approach to cultivation of a marine product, and of the fisherman reaping what he has actually sown, is seen in the case of the oyster and mussel industries on the west coast of France, in Holland, America, and, to a less extent, on our own coast. Much has been done by scientific men for these and other similar coastal fisheries since the days when Prof. Coste in France in 1859 introduced oysters from the Scottish oyster-beds to start the great industry at Areachon and elsewhere. Now we buy back the descendants of our own oysters from the French ostreiculturists to replenish our depleted beds.

It is no small matter to have introduced a new and important food-fish to the markets of the world. The remarkable deep-water “tile-fish,” new to science and described as *Lopholatilus chamæleonticeps*, was discovered in 1879 by one of the United States fishing schooners to the south of Nantucket, near the 100-fathom line. Several thousand pounds weight were

<sup>1</sup> Extracts from addresses given at the Cardiff Meeting.

caught, and the matter was duly investigated by the United States Fish Commission. For a couple of years after that the fish was brought to market in quantity, and then something unusual happened at the bottom of the sea, and in 1882 millions of dead tile-fish were found floating on the surface over an area of thousands of square miles. The schooner *Navarino* sailed for two days and a night through at least 150 miles of sea, thickly covered as far as the eye could reach with dead fish, estimated at 256,000 to the square mile. The Fish Commission sent a vessel to fish systematically over the grounds known as the "Gulf Stream slope," where the tile-fish had been so abundant during the two previous years, but she did not catch a single fish, and the associated sub-tropical invertebrate fauna was also practically obliterated.

This wholesale destruction was attributed by the American oceanographers to a sudden change in the temperature of the water at the bottom, due in all probability to a withdrawal southwards of the warm Gulf Stream water and a flooding of the area by the cold Labrador current.

I am indebted to Dr. C. H. Townsend, Director of the celebrated New York Aquarium, for the latest information in regard to the reappearance in quantity of this valuable fish upon the old fishing grounds off Nantucket and Long Island, at about 100 miles from the coast to the east and southeast of New York. It is believed that the tile-fish is now abundant enough to maintain an important fishery, which will add an excellent food-fish to the markets of the United States. It is easily caught with lines at all seasons of the year, and reaches a length of over three feet and a weight of 40 to 50 pounds. During July, 1915, the product of the fishery was about two and a half million pounds weight, valued at 55,000 dollars, and in the first few months of 1917 the catch was four and a half million pounds, for which the fishermen received 247,000 dollars.

We can scarcely hope in European seas to add new food-fishes to our markets, but much may be done through the cooperation of scientific investigators of the ocean with the Administrative Departments to bring about a more rational conservation and exploitation of the national fisheries.

Earlier in this address I referred to the pioneer work of the distinguished Manx naturalist, Professor Edward Forbes. There are many of his writings and of his lectures which I have no space to refer to which have points of oceanographic interest. Take this, for example, in reference to our national sea fisheries. We find him in 1847 writing to a friend:

On Friday night I lectured at the Royal Institution. The subject was the bearing of submarine researches and distribution matters on the fishery question. I pitched into government mismanagement pretty strong, and made a fair case of it. It seems to me that at a time when half the country is starving we are utterly neglecting or grossly mis-managing great sources of wealth and food. . . . Were I a rich man I would make the subject a hobby, for the good of the country and for the better proving that the true interests of government are those linked with and inseparable from science.

We must still cordially approve of these last words, while recognizing that our Government Department of Fisheries is now being organized on better lines, is itself carrying on scientific work of national importance, and is, I am happy to think, in complete sympathy with the work of independent scientific investigators of the sea and desirous of closer cooperation with university laboratories and biological stations.

During recent years one of the most important and most frequently discussed of applications of fisheries investigation has been the productivity of the trawling grounds, and especially those of the North Sea. It has been generally agreed that the enormous increase of fishing power during the last forty years or so has reduced the number of large plaice, so that the average size of that fish caught in our home waters has become smaller, although the total number of plaice landed had continued to increase up to the year of the outbreak of war. Since then, from 1914 to 1919, there has of necessity been what may be described as the most gigantic experiment ever seen in the closing of extensive fishing grounds. It is still too early to say with any certainty exactly what the results of that experiment have been, although some indications of an increase of the fish population in certain areas have been recorded. For example, the Danes, A. C. Johansen and Kirstine Smith, find that large plaice landed in Denmark are now more abundant, and they attribute this to a reversal of the pre-war tendency, due to less intensive fishing. But Dr. James Johnstone has pointed out that there is some evidence of a natural periodicity in abundance of such fish and that the results noticed may represent phases in a cyclic change. If the periodicity noted in Liverpool Bay<sup>2</sup> holds good for other grounds it will be necessary in any comparison of pre-war and post-war statistics to take this natural variation in abundance into very careful consideration.

In the application of oceanographic investigations to sea-fisheries problems, one ultimate aim, whether frankly admitted

<sup>2</sup> See Johnstone, *Report Lancs. Sea-Fish. Lab. for 1917*, p. 60; and Daniel, *Report for 1919*, p. 51.

or not, must be to obtain some kind of a rough approximation to a census or valuation of the sea—of the fishes that form the food of man, of the lower animals of the sea-bottom on which many of the fishes feed, and of the planktonic contents of the upper waters which form the ultimate organized food of the sea—and many attempts have been made in different ways to attain the desired end.

Our knowledge of the number of animals living in different regions of the sea is for the most part relative only. We know that one haul of the dredge is larger than another, or that one locality seems richer than another, but we have very little information as to the actual numbers of any kind of animal per square foot or per acre in the sea. Hensen, as we have seen, attempted to estimate the number of food-fishes in the North Sea from the number of their eggs caught in a comparatively small series of hauls of the tow-net, but the data were probably quite insufficient and the conclusions may be erroneous. It is an interesting speculation to which we can not attach any economic importance. Heincke says of it:

This method appears theoretically feasible, but presents in practise so many serious difficulties that no positive results of real value have as yet been obtained.

All biologists must agree that to determine even approximately the number of individuals of any particular species living in a known area is a contribution to knowledge which may be of great economic value in the case of the edible fishes, but it may be doubted whether Hensen's methods, even with greatly increased data, will ever give us the required information. Petersen's method, of setting free marked plaice and then assuming that the proportion of these recaptured is to the total number marked as the fishermen's catch in the same district is to the total population, will only hold good in circumscribed areas where there is practically no migration and where the fish are fairly evenly distributed. This method gives us what has been called "the fishing coefficient," and this has been estimated for the North Sea to have a probable value of about 0.33 for those sizes of fish which are caught by the trawl. Heincke,<sup>3</sup> from an actual examination of samples of the stock on the ground obtained by experimental trawling ("the catch coefficient"), supplemented by the market returns of the various countries, estimates the adult plaice at about 1,500 millions,

<sup>3</sup> F. Heincke, *Cons. Per. Internat. Explor. de la Mer*, "Investigations on the Plaice," Copenhagen, 1913.

of which about 500 millions are caught or destroyed by the fishermen annually.

It is difficult to imagine any further method which will enable us to estimate any such case as, say, the number of plaice in the North Sea where the individuals are so far beyond our direct observation and are liable to change their positions at any moment. But a beginning can be made on more accessible ground with more sedentary animals, and Dr. C. G. Joh. Petersen, of the Danish Biological Station, has for some years been pursuing the subject in a series of interesting reports on the "Evaluation of the Sea."<sup>4</sup> He uses a bottom-sampler, or grab, which can be lowered down open and then closed on the bottom so as to bring up a sample square foot or square meter (or in deep water one tenth of a square meter) of the sand or mud and its inhabitants. With this apparatus, modified in size and weight for different depths and bottoms, Peterson and his fellow-workers have made a very thorough examination of the Danish waters, and especially of the Kattegat and the Limfjord, have described a series of "animal communities" characteristic of different zones and regions of shallow water, and have arrived at certain numerical results as to the quantity of animals in the Kattegat expressed in tons—such as 5,000 tons of plaice requiring as food 50,000 tons of "useful animals" (mollusca and polychæt worms), and 25,000 tons of starfish using up 200,000 tons of useful animals which might otherwise serve as food for fishes, and the dependence of all these animals directly or indirectly upon the great Beds of *Zostera*, which make up 24,000,000 tons in Kattegat. Such estimates are obviously of great biological interest, and even if only rough approximations are a valuable contribution to our understanding of the metabolism of the sea and of the possibility of increasing the yield of local fisheries.

But on studying these Danish results in the light of what we know of our own marine fauna, although none of our seas has been examined in the same detail by the bottom-sampler method, it seems probable that the animal communities as defined by Petersen are not exactly applicable on our coasts and that the estimates of relative and absolute abundance may be very different in different seas under different conditions. The work will have to be done in each great area, such as the North Sea, the English Channel, and the Irish Sea, independently. This is a necessary investigation, both biological and physical,

<sup>4</sup> See *Reports of the Danish Biological Station*, and especially the *Report for 1918* "The Sea Bottom and its Production of Fish Food."

which lies before the oceanographers of the future, upon the results of which the future preservation and further cultivation of our national sea-fisheries may depend.

It has been shown by Johnstone and others that the common edible animals of the shore may exist in such abundance that an area of the sea may be more productive of food for man than a similar area of pasture or crops on land. A Lancashire mussel bed has been shown to have as many as 16,000 young mussels per square foot, and it is estimated that in the shallow waters of Liverpool Bay there are from twenty to 200 animals of sizes varying from an amphipod to a plaice on each square meter of the bottom.<sup>5</sup>

From these and similar data which can be readily obtained, it is not difficult to calculate totals by estimating the number of square yards in areas of similar character between tide-marks or in shallow water. And from weighings of samples some approximation to the number of tons of available food may be computed. But one must not go too far. Let all the figures be based upon actual observation. Imagination is necessary in science, but in calculating a population of even a very limited area it is best to believe only what one can see and measure.

Countings and weighings, however, do not give us all the information we need. It is something to know even approximately the number of millions of animals on a mile of shore and the number of millions of tons of possible food in a sea-area, but that is not sufficient. All food-fishes are not equally nourishing to man, and all plankton and bottom invertebrata are not equally nourishing to a fish. At this point the biologist requires the assistance of the physiologist and the bio-chemist. We want to know next the value of our food matters in proteids, carbohydrates, and fats, and the resulting calories. Dr. Johnstone, of the oceanography department of the University of Liverpool, has already shown us how markedly a fat summer herring differs in essential constitution from the ordinary white fish, such as the cod, which is almost destitute of fat.

Professor Brandt, at Kiel, Professor Benjamin Moore, at Port Erin, and others have similarly shown that plankton gatherings may vary greatly in their nutrient value according as they are composed mainly of Diatoms, of Dinoflagellates, or of Copepoda. And, no doubt, the animals of the "benthos," the common invertebrates of our shores, will show similar differ-

<sup>5</sup> "Conditions of Life in the Sea," Cambridge Univ. Press, 1908.

ences in analysis.<sup>6</sup> It is obvious that some contain more solid flesh, others more water in their tissues, others more calcareous matter in the exoskeleton, and that therefore weight for weight we may be sure that some are more nutritious than the others; and this is probably at least one cause of that preference we see in some of our bottom-feeding fish for certain kinds of food, such as polychæt worms, in which there is relatively little waste, and thin-shelled lamellibranch molluscs, such as young mussels, which have a highly nutrient body in a comparatively thin and brittle shell.

My object in referring to these still incomplete investigations is to direct attention to what seems a natural and useful extension of faunistic work, for the purpose of obtaining some approximation to a quantitative estimate of the more important animals of our shores and shallow water and their relative values as either the immediate or the ultimate food of marketable fishes.

Each such fish has its "food-chain" or series of alternative chains, leading back from the food of man to the invertebrates upon which it preys and then to the food of these, and so down to the smallest and simplest organisms in the sea, and each such chain must have all its links fully worked out as to seasonal and quantitative occurrence back to the Diatoms and Flagellates which depend upon physical conditions and take us beyond the range of biology—but not beyond that of oceanography. The Diatoms and the Flagellates are probably more important than the more obvious sea-weeds not only as food, but also in supplying to the water the oxygen necessary for the respiration of living protoplasm. Our object must be to estimate the rate of production and rate of destruction of all organic substances in the sea.

To attain to an approximate census and valuation of the sea—remote though it may seem—is a great aim, but it is not sufficient. We want not only to observe and to count natural objects, but also to understand them. We require to know not merely what an organism is—in the fullest detail of structure and development and affinities—and also where it occurs—again in full detail—and in what abundance under different circumstances, but also *how* it lives and what all its relations are to

<sup>6</sup> Moore and others have made analyses of the protein, fat, etc., in the soft parts of Sponge, Ascidian, Aplysia, Fusus, Echinus and Cancer at Port Erin, and find considerable differences—the protein ranging, for example, from 8 to 51 per cent., and the fat from 2 to 14 per cent. (see *Bio-Chemical Journ.*, VI., p. 291).

both its physical and its biological environment, and that is where the physiologist, and especially the bio-chemist, can help us. In the best interests of biological progress the day of the naturalist who merely collects, the day of the anatomist and histologist who merely describe, is over, and the future is with the observer and the experimenter animated by a divine curiosity to enter into the life of the organism and understand how it lives and moves and has its being. "Happy indeed is he who has been able to discover the causes of things."

Cardiff is a sea-port, and a great sea-port, and the Bristol Channel is a notable sea-fisheries center of growing importance. The explorers and merchant venturers of the southwest of England are celebrated in history. What are you doing now in Cardiff to advance our knowledge of the ocean? You have here an important university center and a great modern national museum, and either or both of these homes of research might do well to establish an oceanographical department, which would be an added glory to your city and of practical utility to the country. This is the obvious center in Wales for a sea-fisheries institute for both research and education. Many important local movements have arisen from British Association meetings, and if such a notable scientific development were to result from the Cardiff meeting of 1920, all who value the advance of knowledge and the application of knowledge to industry would applaud your enlightened action.

But in a wider sense, it is not to the people of Cardiff alone that I appeal, but to the whole population of these Islands, a maritime people who owe everything to the sea. I urge them to become better informed in regard to our national sea-fisheries and take a more enlightened interest in the basal principles that underlie a rational regulation and exploitation of these important industries. National efficiency depends to a very great extent upon the degree in which scientific results and methods are appreciated by the people and scientific investigation is promoted by the government and other administrative authorities. The principles and discoveries of science apply to aquiculture no less than to agriculture. To increase the harvest of the sea the fisheries must be continuously investigated, and such cultivation as is possible must be applied, and all this is clearly a natural application of the biological and hydrographical work now united under the science of oceanography.